

# An Academic or a More Practical Approach

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*By Xiao Aili*

I have been teaching English at Changsha Education College in the Hunan Province of China for 15 years. Most of my students are unqualified secondary-school English teachers and some are straight from high school. What they have in common, like most students all over China, is that they can't talk easily in English. Some can't even speak English at all, even though they have studied the language for several years. I often feel frustrated when I am asked by some students to give an equivalent Chinese definition to a very simple English word or to translate what I am teaching into Chinese. Once, when we came to the word "outlet," I walked over and pointed at the outlet in the wall and said two or three times, "This is an outlet." Several students still looked puzzled and one of them asked: "What does 'outlet' mean in Chinese?" This doesn't signify that the students aren't smart. The fact only indicates that these students have formed the habit of translating every English word into Chinese; without Chinese they cannot understand English.

Why do they do this? My opinion is that the traditional grammar-translation method is chiefly responsible. It has been dominating English teaching in China since English became the first foreign language and a course in secondary schools in our country. I'm afraid it will continue to be the dominant method for some time to come. Why it is so popular and how this problem can be solved is worth discussing.

Historically, it seemed there was no need for students to master the four skills of English (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) since China had a closed-door foreign policy and people seldom had the chance to talk with other English speakers. There was no demand for people with good spoken English. So, the teaching objective was not for students to be able to speak English, but for them to be able to pass the written exams and read some science and technology materials in English. Most English textbooks were designed for these goals, and the exams were mainly focused on testing students' reading comprehension and knowledge of English sentence structure and grammar. Therefore, sentence structure and grammar seemed far more important than listening and speaking. The grammar-translation method served the purpose well.

But why do both teachers and students take the exams so seriously? This has something to do with our examination system. Following the example of the traditional Chinese imperial examination system (an exam held to choose the top candidates to be high officials in the ancient government), a national college entrance examination is held once a year. Those who want to go to universities and colleges have to sit the exams. Passing the exams doesn't necessarily mean that a student gets the chance to receive a higher education; the student has to get very high marks. The higher the marks are, the more opportunities the student has. One mark less than the entrance mark means the student will lose the chance this year, or possibly forever. That explains to some degree why most teachers and students (in China and other countries of the world) are

still teaching and studying English for the exams. They are neglecting the fact that a large number of qualified people with good oral English are needed now that China has a more "open policy."

Among all the second-language-teaching methods, the grammar-translation method is the easiest for a teacher to employ. It doesn't require a teacher to speak good English or make good lesson preparations. All a teacher needs to do is to put English into Chinese, word by word, sentence by sentence. The teacher doesn't need to prepare and use any other teaching tools except the textbook. The teacher is a translator rather than an instructor to the students. Also, students find it much easier to understand English with the help of Chinese.

Another reason for the dominance of the grammar-translation method is that there are not enough qualified English teachers. A qualified English teacher should not only be capable in all four skills, but also know how to work with the students so they learn to communicate with other English speakers. But quite a number of teachers, especially in the vast rural areas, only have a secondary school education. What they know about English is limited to some basic English grammar and vocabulary. They have very poor pronunciation and intonation, with a strong local accent, and they cannot speak English fluently. For them the grammar-translation method is the most acceptable because they can basically teach English in Chinese. English teaching is comparatively new in our country and most English teachers, especially the more experienced ones, know little about the newer methodologies. Quite often, ironically, it is those who can't teach English well who are chosen to teach the methodology courses. Some teachers never hear about other teaching methods, only the grammar-translation method.

The most serious fact is that this inefficient approach is continually reinforced. When some of the students who have been taught with the grammar-translation method turn out to be English teachers, they are most likely to use the same method in their teaching. When my student teachers had their teaching practice in the middle schools in the countryside, their mentors would advise them to teach English in Chinese. Their students felt very happy if they did so. When my colleagues don't use the grammar-translation method and try to give our students more oral practice in class, some students grumble and some even request a change of lecturer. Quite a number of teachers and senior students want to stay with the grammar-translation method because they think learning language syntax and grammar in translation is a more academic way of learning English. English is taken as pure knowledge, not a skill. They expect to learn something new about English grammar in every class. If the teacher fails to meet this expectation, the students feel they aren't learning anything. This shows how strongly the grammar-translation method has taken root in English teaching in China and how difficult it is to get rid of such an inappropriate method and bring about change.

Changing the exam system is essential if we want the middle-school English teachers to move away from using the grammar-translation method and change from teaching for exams to training the students to use English as a communicative tool. More and more people have realized what a big burden the national college entrance exam has become. This is true not only for students and their parents, but also for each high school and its teachers since people judge a school only by how many of its students are enrolled into colleges and universities. More and more, experts plead for the exam system to be changed.

To change the content of English exams would be a big step in English teaching reform. Although a new set of middle school English textbooks, chiefly based on spoken English, has been used since 1992, many teachers still have to resort to the grammar-translation method because they don't want their students to fail the English exams based on grammar and sentence structure. We should cut down the percentage of grammar on the exam and put more emphasis on testing students' listening and speaking abilities. With a change in testing, the teachers will have to change their methods.

To train more qualified teachers is a key in the whole system. Here "qualified teachers" refers to those with both the ability in the four skills and the knowledge of efficient teaching approaches to help students master the skills. You cannot expect a teacher who cannot speak English to teach English in English. The methodologies of teaching English should be a main course in our teacher training programs. This course should be taught by those who have knowledge of the various methodologies available. Let the new teachers be fully prepared before their teaching career begins.

Of all the change factors, the most important one is the English teachers themselves. They must make the effort and be willing to change their methods. They must be confident that their students can understand them when they teach in English. When my students ask me to give them the Chinese meaning, I seldom grant their request. Instead, I try my best to help them understand without using Chinese. I show them objects or pictures, make facial expressions, use mime, give synonyms and antonyms, explain using other words, and so forth. For example, When I taught "stuffy nose," I put two fingers on my nose and held tightly while I was saying, "When you catch a cold, you may have a stuffy nose." I also made it seem as if I could not breathe through my nose. When a student asked about the meaning of "a clearing," I explained: "It is a place without trees, but surrounded with trees." The biggest advantage of teaching English in English is that you can aid your students to begin to think in English, rather than translating between Chinese and English. This will improve their ability to talk with other English speakers.

If our students can't talk easily with other English speakers after studying the language for six to ten years, (six years in middle school and four years at college and university), we cannot say our teaching is successful. We may have wasted our students' time by teaching them only grammar and teaching them English in Chinese.

China is developing fast and is badly in need of a competent cadre of English speakers. This is the same situation in many other countries of the world. Overall reform in language education is the key, beginning with teacher training and including reform in testing, methodology, curricula, and materials.

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